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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine the relationship of certain achievement-related constructs to individual motivation for social and occupational mobility. The specific achievement-related behavior which was studied centered on the decision to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in a union-sponsored college program offered to non-professional employees. All of the workers had an equal opportunity to attend college through the program, so the research focused on the intragroup differences among persons of lower socioeconomic status as reflected in their choosing to adopt the achievement-related behavior of college attendance. Findings supported the hypotheses that the variables of occupational aspirations and expectation and educational aspiration and expectation make a significant contribution to the variance of the dependent variable of college attendance. A significant relationship between high job satisfaction and aspiration for advancement within current occupational field was shown for the college-attending subjects. (LRA)

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This report can be of significant value to vocational education change agents and others concerned with populations whose needs have not been met heretofore or who, for other reasons, have been disenfranchised. You are urged to explore the ramifications carefully, and are invited to share your thoughts, experiences and suggestions with the Institute.

Lee Cohen, Ph.D.
Director

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SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND OCCUPATIONAL EDUCATION ASPIRATION

Joyce Brown, Ph.D.

Introduction

The construct of human motivation has been the focus of much research in the past. Specifically, the nature of achievement motivation, and its value as a predictor of behavior in specific situations, has been studied extensively. Most of the research studies have predicted a high level of achievement motivation (or need for achievement) among persons of middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status. In the existing literature, the predictions have been borne out by the data comparing persons of upper and middle socioeconomic status to persons of lower socioeconomic status.

In 1946, Weber used the term "life-chance" to describe those opportunities which distinguish the quality of one's life. Statistics on the American economy indicate that many of the most important life chances (education, occupation, income opportunities) are distributed unequally in accordance with socioeconomic standing. Succinctly stated, there is a positive relationship between class and opportunity. Nevertheless, in American society today many persons of lower socioeconomic status (i.e., working class individuals filling semi-skilled and unskilled jobs) are gaining increasing access to those areas of life previously considered perquisites of the upper socioeconomic classes. Significant social changes have taken place in American society during the past decade. However, existing research on the motivational factors which can direct behavior (such as need for achievement) deals predominantly with persons of the middle social class whose environmental milieu led to early educational and occupational planning. Using achievement motivation as a predictor of behavior in these studies of comparative behaviors between social class groups, investigators have, for the most part, categorized persons of lower social status as low on need for achievement while emphasizing the individual differences and variability of behavior for middle social class persons.

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The sociological assumption underlying much of this past research appears to indicate that the lower social classes hold certain beliefs and values which maintain the relationship between low status and lack of upward mobility, and restricts voluntary action to ameliorate their low status. Such assumptions are open to question. If an interdependence between "life-chances" (socioeconomic indices) and opportunities for improved life status does exist, while opportunities for changing "life-chances" are a recent phenomenon of our social practices, generalizations and comparisons regarding achievement behaviors which were made across class lines should be treated circumspectly. Such generalizations about class behavior can be basically misleading.

Recent developments in the work force have created training programs and opportunities for mobility for women and members of other minority groups that would not have been considered a decade ago. The changing nature of social class stratification responses is witnessed by the increased numbers of educational and skill upgrading programs offered for employees. The numbers of programs are a corollary to the level of interest prevailing within the ranks of the unskilled. Generally, these programs are a result of a negotiated agreement between labor and management. Just as health and welfare benefits have come to be an expected aspect of contract negotiations, so too have educational benefits come to signify an integral aspect of the employee package. The response indicates an active striving on the part of many lower socioeconomic status semi-skilled workers to achieve the goal of "success" which was previously defined by upper-class status.

One purpose of this investigation was to challenge the prevailing conception about low to lower-middle class persons as not reflective of the changes in our society in the areas of motivation, aspiration, and social mobility. The documentation of the traditional differences between middle and lower-class life styles typically characterizes the working class as impulsive and uninhibited, conforming to externally imposed standards; the middle class as more rational, controlled, guided by a broader perspective in time, self-direction, and internal dynamics. Such broad-based generalizations are no longer valid in the face of contemporary social practice and privilege which can exist regardless of social class. There are strong indications based on the changing nature of working class socialization that a convergence between the social classes is taking place regarding orientation toward and expectations of success, as well as expectations for increased income and education levels. The research of Bronfenbrenner (1958) and Matras (1975) emphasizes these assertions.

The implications for occupational educators are varied. The process by which similar settings produce different impacts upon individuality has not been investigated systematically. The complexity of the relations between the cultural environment (family background) and social mobility was identified by Goode (1964). It is in the cultural environment that individual motivation to achieve and the social and intellectual skills that may help or hinder advancement are developed. A recent study by Jencks, Bartlett, Corcoran, Crouse, Eaglesfield, Jackson, McClelland, Mueser, Olneck, Schwartz, Ward and Williams (1979) examined the impact of education, family background, race, personal skills and traits on

occupational status and earnings. The authors submit that education does affect aspirations. Among their explanations for this hypothesis are the possibilities that either education increases workers' aversion to low status occupations or, by imparting values, attitudes, and behavior patterns that correlate to employer expectations, education enables an individual to be more successful at competing for higher level jobs. They found college graduates working in higher status jobs than those to which they aspired in high school, and workers who did not go to colleges working in jobs with lower status than they wanted during the same period.

A number of studies provide evidence that motivation may be an important determinant of differential occupational mobility. The importance of higher education for advancement on the career ladder remains a major consideration for occupational mobility. Historically, educational attainment has been the key to occupational and social mobility. Feirabend, Feirabend and Nesvold (1969) asserted that increased interest in educational attainment by minority or lower social class groups indicates heightened social aspirations and interest in improved social status.

Upward mobility in the working class is directly related to strength of need for achievement, according to the research of Crockett (1962). He asserted that strong achievement motivation is one of the antecedants of occupational mobility among persons sharing equal opportunity. His findings are based on national data gathered from persons for whom roughly equal opportunity for mobility may be said to exist (persons from similar regional, occupational, and educational backgrounds). Today, many persons of lower SES, prevented in the past from competition on the career ladder, have recognized the interaction between education and occupational mobility. Their demands for acceptance in educational programs are reinforced by their increased expectation for effecting changes in their social and occupational status.

Certain research findings (Yankelovitch, 1974, and Bell, 1975) have also indicated that emerging cultural trends, such as a changing definition of success to include self-realization and fulfillment, and a growing psychology of "entitlement" leading to new social and psychological rights, have transformed the American work ethic.

The reasons people work can vary from a need to provide the basic commodities for survival to the social gratification of interrelating in the work place, to an inherent need to achieve the means for social mobility through occupational attainment. Jobs readily available to be filled by those in the lower social strata are those demanding the fewest skills or least experience, carrying the least responsibility, having the least coordination with the economic production system. Members of the working class have demonstrated a willingness to continue in dead-end but secure positions. The translation of these low aspiration, security-based concerns to a motivation for increased occupational prestige and status is very complex. Korman's (1976) research pointed out the importance of individual belief in the effects of personal efforts to increased occupational effectiveness and aspiration. The literature supports the propo-

sition that persons within the lower socioeconomic strata realistically have only one avenue to change their social milieu: that is, through increased occupational status. While the need to work may be based in mundane considerations the literature indicates that the motivation to work may well be bound to increased aspiration for vocational and social attainment.

Occupational attainment is clearly affected by level of formal education. Increased education can herald the first awakening of a group or population to a higher level of participation in society. The literature shows that there is a direct correlation between increased educational aspiration and increased opportunities for mobility and improved life conditions. Similarly, the research findings of Peterson (1974), as well as Rodman, Hyman, and Voydavoff (1978) showed that today a wide range of educational and occupational aspirations are held by working class persons, both for themselves and for their children.

The Study

This research was designed to examine the relationship of certain achievement-related constructs to individual motivation for social and occupational mobility. The specific achievement-related behavior which was studied centered on the decision to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in a union-sponsored college program offered to non-professional employees. All of the workers had an equal opportunity to attend college through the program, so the research focused on the intra-group differences among persons of lower socioeconomic status as reflected in their choosing to adopt the achievement-related behavior of college attendance.

College attendance was chosen as the criterion behavior because of its many related social and occupational change consequences. There is a great deal of research relating the pursuit of a college education to motivation for achievement. The intent in this research approach was to determine the variability of achievement behaviors among workers of lower socioeconomic status, and to determine whether or not studying a single social class group would give the same continuum of achievement behaviors revealed by a comparison of lower to middle social class groups.

The sample was comprised of 400 subjects. All were volunteers. The instruments were coded so that all data was collected anonymously. The sample was essentially homogeneous with regard to socioeconomic status, sex, ethnicity, marital status and having responsibility for children. The sample was divided into two sub-groups: a) those persons pursuing a college education, either on their own or through the educational opportunities offered by the union; and b) those persons with equal opportunity to participate in the union-sponsored program but who had not taken advantage of this opportunity, nor were they pursuing a college education on their own.

A Personal Data Questionnaire was used to obtain demographic and descriptive data about the sample. In addition, levels of occupational aspiration and expectations, as well as educational aspiration and expectation, were determined by the subject's responses to questions operationally defined by the phrase "would like" (for aspiration) and those operationally defined by the phrase "expect" (for expectation). The occupational status level for aspiration and expectation was assessed by Hamburger's (1958) Revised Occupational Scale for Rating Socioeconomic Status. Similarly, socioeconomic status was derived from occupational information for self and spouse and assessed by the Hamburger scale. Job satisfaction was measured by the Job Satisfaction Index. The Rotter I-E Scale was used to assess locus of control of reinforcement.

The need for achievement and the need for affiliation were measured by means of the Cue Interpretations Task--Thematic Apperception Verbal Cues. The Wonderlic Personnel Test was used to assess mental ability. Data were analyzed for hypothesis testing by means of a hierarchical regression analysis, a point biserial correlation coefficient, and a Pearson product-moment correlation (alpha = .05).

With regard to the regression analysis the dependent variable was the dichotomous choice of attending college: the first priority covariate was mental ability. The motivational variables were entered into the equation in the following order: need for achievement, locus of control, occupational aspiration, occupational expectation, educational aspiration, educational expectation, and job satisfaction.

Findings

The hypotheses which predicted that the variables of occupational aspiration and expectation and educational aspiration and expectation would make a significant contribution to the variance of the dependent variable of college attendance was supported. The hypotheses which predicted that the other motivational variables would make a significant contribution to the variance of the dependent variable were not supported.

Further, it was hypothesized that for the college-attending group, those with high job satisfaction would be more likely to aspire to advancement within their occupational field; those with low job satisfaction would be more likely to aspire to a different occupation. This hypothesis was supported, showing a significant relation between high job satisfaction and aspiration for advancement within current occupational field, for the college-attending subjects.

Finally, it was hypothesized that for those subjects attending college there is a greater relation between occupational aspiration and expectation than for those who do not attend college; and that for those subjects attending college there is a greater relation between educational aspiration and expectation than for those who do not attend college. The results show that while there is a predictive relation between aspiration and expectation for both occupation and education, within each group, this relation is not significantly different between the groups. These hypotheses were not supported.

The total proportion of variance accounted for by the regression equation was 18%; the aspiration and expectation variables were the most significant contributors, accounting for 13.43% of the variance.

Discussion

The results of this study, which indicated that the proportion of variance accounted for by the motivational variables was 18%, are less than what may be needed to make definitive statements with regard to theory. The theory and research concerned with achievement motivation have traditionally focused on comparisons of achievement behaviors of lower and middle social-class persons. When comparing those groups, the results of research have indicated that lower-class persons are satisfied with the status quo and make no effort to bring about change in their social conditions through achievement-related behaviors.

Since, in recent times, there has been demonstrated some convergence of the social classes in terms of psychological processes and overt behavior, the present study was designed to raise questions regarding the class differences which past research has suggested. Whereas, the results of the present research do point to achievement behaviors for lower SES persons which are similar to those previously identified for middle-class persons alone, the fact that 82% of the variance was unaccounted for makes the implications more tentative than would have been desirable.

With regard to applying the traditional rationale of measured need for achievement and need for affiliation to the behavior of lower social-class persons, the results of the present study did not demonstrate high levels of the motives; nor did it demonstrate great intra-group differences on need for achievement and need for affiliation. It did demonstrate, however, a prevailing philosophy among these lower social-class subjects, of dissatisfaction with the status quo and high levels of aspiration, expectation for greater advancement, and expectation for greater success of their children.

It is possible that earlier assumptions regarding the relation between high aspiration and achievement behavior are not always valid for persons of lower SES. It may well be that one of the main differentiating factors between the classes in the area of motivation for achievement is the lack of convergence between aspiration and behavior for the lower social-class person. The qualitative difference is a behavioral one which may emanate from a high level of integration between aspiration and the behaviors necessary to in fact achieve for the middle social classes, and a lower level of behavioral response to aspirations and expectation for attainment in the lower social classes.

Some Conclusions

For the counselor, educator, college administrator, and employer the implications of this study are important for counseling the "non-traditional" student, for targeting the focus of in-service training programs,

for assessment of institutional offerings, and for conducting needs analyses for program planning.

Preparation for the world of academia, as well as the reasons for being there, are different for the older, "non-traditional" lower SES student than for his/her younger middle-class counterpart. With the influx to the college campus of "non-traditional" students over the past decade, some attempts have been made to address the needs of the students once they have arrived on the campus. Very little research has been done, however, on the factors that motivate the lower SES individual to compete in the academic arena, or on what their aspirations and expectations may be. Long-range strategies need to be developed to ensure that vocational education programs are compatible with the expectations and needs of the "new" students for whom they are designed.

Further, there is reason to believe that the subjects who volunteered for this study are representative of lower SES workers in similar non-professional jobs. The importance of job security and the ability to advance without risk to that security are important considerations, as evidenced by the strong relationship of high job satisfaction, college attendance, and aspiration for advancement within the current occupational field. Employers should maintain an awareness of the motivation for work prevailing within the ranks of non-professional workers. Past research evidence (Goodwin, 1972) indicated that individual beliefs in the efficacy of efforts to achieve success become an influential factor in determining working potential and satisfactions derived from job experiences. What should be addressed is the awareness of the worker's desire for an improvement in the quality of his/her life.

The socio-cultural climate of American society requires recognition of affirmative action considerations by employers, which includes consideration of minority group members for representation in those ranks of production previously closed to them because of their lack of opportunity for preparation. The social unrest of the sixties appears to have created a milieu of expectancy and a belief in the ability to secure some of the better "life-chances" by lower socioeconomic non-professional workers. Certainly this is evident from supplementary analyses of this data which demonstrated their conviction that their children will attain an education and subsequently have their choice of occupational opportunities.

These are important considerations for the workplace. Work productivity is served by persons who believe they are working toward a better future. The level of job satisfaction within this sample was basically one of indifference toward the job. Yet some of the workers were able to set a long-range goal (occupational advancement through increased education), work toward that goal (college attendance), and delay gratification by maintaining their current position. The point is addressed by Matras (1975) in discussing the current trends in working-class socialization and the strong indications of convergence in the very areas of stratum differences (such as having a broader perspective in time) which have differentiated the social classes.

Therefore, it may be concluded that in the development of long-range strategies that ensure programs are compatible with the expectations and needs of the "new" student, the importance of security and the ability to advance without risk to that security should play an important role. An awareness among occupational counselors and employers that belief in the rewards of achievement efforts significantly influence working potential and job satisfaction undoubtedly will impact upon the work ethic and quality of productivity.

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